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GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA: CULTURAL, LEGAL, AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES UNDER THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most widespread phenomena globally. As one of the most severe forms of violence, it seriously violates fundamental human rights and freedoms, manifesting itself on both national and international levels. North Macedonia, like many other countries, is significantly affected by this issue. As a signatory to the Istanbul Convention, North Macedonia has undertaken a series of measures aimed at preventing and protecting individuals from GBV. However, due to persistent shortcomings and influencing factors particularly cultural, legal, and economic efforts to combat this phenomenon remain insufficient and call for a more serious and inclusive approach.

In light of these challenges, this paper analyzes the phenomenon of gender-based violence in North Macedonia within the framework of the Istanbul Convention, with particular focus on the cultural, legal, and economic factors that influence both its emergence and the institutional response. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach by examining legal, political, and socio-economic data, as well as official documents and reports from local and international organizations.

Findings indicate that, despite notable progress in aligning domestic legislation with the Convention, practical implementation remains problematic due to structural barriers, lack of institutional resources, and the persistence of traditional and patriarchal norms. Economically, women's financial dependency and inequality in the labor market often prevent victims from escaping the cycle of violence.

This study highlights the need for a comprehensive and coordinated response involving state institutions, civil society, and local communities. Particular emphasis is placed on education, the economic empowerment of women, and the professional training of those working in the field. The recommendations aim to enhance current policies and promote the effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention as a crucial step toward building a more just and safe society for all.

Key words: gender-based violence (GBV), North Macedonia, Istanbul Convention, cultural, legal and economic factors.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive and serious issue that affects individuals, families, and society as a whole, with profound social, economic, and psychological consequences. This phenomenon is closely linked to power structures and gender inequality, manifesting in various forms such as physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence. In North Macedonia, gender-based violence is a visible issue and represents a challenge that requires urgent and multifaceted attention from state institutions and civil society.

On one hand, cultural and societal factors have a deep influence on the distribution and spread of gender-based violence. Traditional norms, gender stereotypes, and social expectations surrounding the roles of men and women often contribute to the normalization of violence, making it difficult not only to identify and report cases of violence but also to address it effectively. In this context, many individuals, especially women, may feel pressured or incapable of seeking help due to social stigma and fear of judgment.

On the other hand, legislation and legal practices in North Macedonia have made significant progress in recent decades, particularly after the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, a key international instrument for preventing and combating gender-based violence. However, the implementation of this convention has encountered considerable challenges. Often, the application of laws and protective measures depends on factors such as the lack of training for legal professionals, insufficient awareness of victims' rights, and poor cooperation between different institutions. This has created a noticeable gap between legislation and its practical application, thus limiting the protection of individuals who are victims of violence.

The economic aspect also plays an important role in addressing gender-based violence. In North Macedonia, as in many other countries, women are often excluded from economic opportunities and direct employment, making them more vulnerable to poverty and economic violence. Poverty and economic insecurity are factors that help maintain the cycle of violence, making victims dependent on their abusers and complicating their escape from abusive relationships.

In this context, this paper aims to analyze the impact of cultural, legal, and economic factors on the distribution and addressing of gender-based violence in North Macedonia, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities presented by the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Adopting a holistic approach that includes these three perspectives is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of gender-based violence and for improving the protection and prevention mechanisms at both the national and international levels. By examining these aspects, a deeper insight will be provided into the current state of gender-based violence in North Macedonia and the ongoing opportunities for improving policies and practices aimed at eliminating this phenomenon.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a complex phenomenon that affects millions of individuals worldwide and is recognized as a human rights violation. This form of violence is closely linked to gender inequality and has severe consequences for victims, including the loss of dignity, mental and physical health, and the potential for social isolation. International conventions have played a significant role in recognizing and addressing gender-based violence, creating legal frameworks and international mechanisms to protect victims and promote social justice. The Istanbul Convention, as a key international instrument, has provided a detailed and responsive framework for combating gender-based violence and ensuring victim protection on a global level. This chapter will explore the definitions and forms of gender-based violence as outlined in international conventions, the causes that contribute to its spread, and the importance of implementing these conventions in participating states.

Gender-based violence is an act of violence committed against individuals because of their gender and is crucial to understanding the gender inequality that exists in many societies. In the context of international conventions, the definition of gender-based violence has become clearer and more detailed. According to the Istanbul Convention, gender-based violence is defined as “any act of violence that results in or is likely to result in harm to women, including physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence” (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 6). This definition is broad and encompasses various forms of violence, which may occur in both the private sphere, such as family and intimate partner relationships, and in the public sphere. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender-based violence has a profound impact on the physical and mental health of victims, often leading to lasting consequences, including bodily harm, depression, anxiety, and psychological trauma (World Health Organization, 2013, p. 17). Furthermore, the Beijing Declaration (1995) by the United Nations emphasizes that gender-based violence is a violation of human rights and an obstacle to social and economic development (United Nations, 1995, p. 58).

International conventions identify several forms of gender-based violence, which may manifest in various ways across societies. According to the Istanbul Convention, some of the most recognized forms of violence include:

Physical violence: this includes any act that causes bodily harm, including hitting, beating, and any other form of violence intended to subjugate the victim and inflict physical damage (Council of Europe, 2011).

Sexual violence: rape and sexual assault are among the most violent forms of gender-based violence and include any act that uses force or threats to compel someone to engage in sexual activities against their will (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 7). These acts have severe consequences and negatively affect the physical and mental health of victims. Psychological and emotional violence includes intimidation, threats, and psychological manipulation that affect the victim’s mental health, causing insecurity and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2013, p. 19). According to UN Women (2015), psychological violence is often harder to identify but has deep and lasting effects on victims.

Economic violence: This form of violence involves controlling financial resources and blocking opportunities for employment and economic independence, leaving the victim dependent on the abuser and unable to escape an abusive situation (Council of Europe, 2011). According to a study by the World Bank (2016), economic violence is one of the most underreported forms of violence, and many victims do not realize they are subject to this form of abuse until they receive adequate support.

The causes of gender-based violence are closely related to cultural factors and social norms that support and justify gender inequality. Gender stereotypes and cultural norms that

favor male dominance and undervalue women create an environment that enables and reinforces violence (United Nations, 1995). UN Women (2015) highlights that societies with strong patriarchal norms are more likely to have high levels of gender-based violence due to power and control structures that are often biased in favor of men.

In addition to cultural norms, socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment also contribute to the spread of gender-based violence. World Bank (2016) argues that poverty and the lack of economic opportunities often make it difficult for victims to leave abusive situations, as they are financially dependent on the abusers. This is a well-known phenomenon in many countries with high levels of social and economic inequality.

States that have ratified the Istanbul Convention are required to create and implement legislation and protective measures to combat gender-based violence. This includes establishing protective infrastructures, such as shelters and support systems for victims, as well as training professionals in various sectors (e.g., police, judges, healthcare providers) to identify and effectively address cases of gender-based violence (Council of Europe, 2011). States are also expected to develop policies and strategies for victim rehabilitation and violence prevention, including education and cultural norm changes that support violence prevention (United Nations, 1995).

According to UN Women (2015), the implementation of these conventions is not sufficient unless supported by strong political and social commitment. The use of international mechanisms, such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations, is necessary to monitor progress and ensure that states fulfill their commitments to women's rights and children's rights. The Beijing Declaration (1995), for example, emphasized the need to ensure that policies on gender-based violence are integrated with policies on sustainable development and gender equality (United Nations, 1995).

THE ROLE OF ISTANBUL CONVENTION

The Istanbul Convention, adopted by the Council of Europe in 2011, is one of the most significant international instruments for preventing and combating gender-based violence and violence in intimate relationships. It provides a legal framework to protect victims of violence, as well as to prevent and punish perpetrators. The purpose of this document is to create a safe environment for women and girls, enabling them to live without fear and violence. This chapter examines the role of the Istanbul Convention in the fight against gender-based violence and its impact on the states that have ratified it, focusing on key aspects such as prevention, victim protection, and international cooperation.

The primary goal of the Istanbul Convention, as stated in Article 1, is to prevent violence against women and girls, protect victims, and assist in the punishment of perpetrators. This article is essential because it defines the scope and objectives of the convention, which include not only physical violence but also psychological, sexual, and economic violence. The Council of Europe (2011) highlights that this broad focus is necessary to address all forms of violence that occur in the daily lives of women and girls, which often remain hidden or unidentified as violence in some societies. In this context, UN Women (2020) underscores the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of different forms of violence and their compounded effects on the mental and physical health of victims. Victims often face multiple forms of violence, which may overlap and reinforce each other, making it harder to break free from the cycle of abuse.

Furthermore, this article clearly emphasizes that gender-based violence is a problem with wide-ranging societal impacts, and its prevention must be a national and international priority. The World Health Organization (2021) states that gender-based violence negatively

impacts not only directly affected individuals but also has consequences for public health, social stability, and economic development.

Article 2 of the Convention offers a detailed definition of gender-based violence and victims. It specifies that gender-based violence is any act of violence committed due to an individual's gender identity. This article covers physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence and emphasizes that violence against women and girls is a violation of human rights and a barrier to achieving gender equality. This clear definition is crucial to ensure that all forms of gender-based violence are recognized and addressed within national legal frameworks. Furthermore, it ensures that states can provide adequate protection and assistance to all victims of violence, regardless of their social, economic, or ethnic status. According to the Council of Europe (2020), this definition is an important step in eliminating gender-based violence and provides an opportunity to raise societal awareness about the nature and consequences of gender-based violence. This definition is also essential for the development of policies aimed at protecting victims and effectively assisting them.

Article 3 of the Convention aims at preventing gender-based violence and violence in intimate relationships by requiring states to take educational and preventive measures. This article seeks to change social and cultural norms that may support violence and promotes public awareness about the consequences of violence against women and girls. The European Parliament (2020) emphasizes the importance of including gender equality and human rights education in schools and training programs for professionals dealing with violence-related issues. Public campaigns promoting gender equality and challenging gender stereotypes are vital for preventing violence and helping to change harmful behaviors that perpetuate violence. Moreover, UN Women (2020) highlights that a key aspect of prevention is empowering women and girls by providing them with economic and educational opportunities that reduce the likelihood of violence. Empowering women and increasing their opportunities for equal participation in society can help reduce violence and discrimination.

Article 5 of the Convention requires states to establish necessary services for victims of violence, including shelters, psychological support, and legal protection. This article is essential in ensuring that victims have safe and reliable options for protection and seeking help. The Convention mandates that protection services be easily accessible and provided in a way that meets the needs of victims, including those who require urgent protection. The World Health Organization (2021) emphasizes that psychological and health support is one of the key elements enabling the recovery of victims of violence. States must ensure that accessible and reliable medical and emotional support services are available, as these are essential to help individuals regain control of their lives after experiencing violence.

Another important aspect of the Convention is international cooperation, as outlined in Article 11. This article requires states to collaborate in combating gender-based violence and assist each other in implementing prevention and protection measures. Such cooperation may involve exchanging information and best practices and providing assistance to countries that may have limited capacity to address this issue. According to the Council of Europe (2020), international cooperation is crucial in helping states develop strong legal and social structures that can protect victims and assist in preventing violence. This cooperation is also important for monitoring and ensuring that member states meet their commitments under the Convention. In conclusion, the Istanbul Convention plays a crucial role in the fight against gender-based violence and violence in intimate relationships. It provides a clear and detailed legal framework for preventing violence and protecting victims, requiring full commitment from states to eliminate violence and protect individuals' rights. Through the implementation of preventive measures, victim support, and international cooperation, the Istanbul Convention contributes to building a more just and equal society, where gender-based violence is unacceptable, and victims have the opportunity to be protected and assisted.

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious and persistent problem in North Macedonia, despite efforts made over the past decades to address this complex social issue. This form of violence, which primarily affects women and girls, manifests in various forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse. The persistence of GBV in North Macedonia is closely linked to a range of cultural, legal, and economic factors that often create an environment that tolerates or normalizes such behavior. This chapter examines the prevalence, causes, and consequences of GBV in the country, with a particular focus on the influence of cultural norms, the legal framework, economic conditions, and the role of international conventions, particularly the Istanbul Convention.

Data on the prevalence of gender-based violence in North Macedonia shows that it is a widespread phenomenon affecting a significant portion of the female population. According to a study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2014), approximately one in three women in North Macedonia has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. This situation aligns with broader trends in the Western Balkans region, where violence against women is alarmingly high. Domestic violence, especially within intimate relationships, is highly prevalent and often supported by patriarchal structures and power imbalances.

Beyond physical and sexual violence, psychological abuse is also significantly present. Many women report experiences of emotional manipulation, threats, and intimidation from partners or family members. Another concerning form is economic violence, where women are denied access to financial resources, not allowed to work, or lack control over income. Despite high figures, the true extent of this violence often remains hidden due to underreporting. Women are reluctant to report violence due to fear of stigmatization, lack of trust in the legal system, or the belief that they will not receive the necessary support. UN Women (2020) emphasizes that the social stigma surrounding victims of violence is one of the key factors that forces women into silence, allowing the cycle of abuse to continue unchallenged.

Cultural norms and traditional perceptions of gender roles play a key role in perpetuating gender-based violence in North Macedonia. In many communities, particularly rural areas, women are seen as subordinate to men, while men are regarded as the primary authority in the household. These patriarchal structures reinforce violence as an acceptable form of control. Bajrami et al. (2019) note that violence is often considered a private matter, and women are frequently pressured to endure abuse to protect the family's honor. Furthermore, traditional views of the dominant and "strong" male identity make addressing violence more difficult. Knezevic (2017) observes that men are often raised to believe that aggression is a component of masculinity, which legitimizes the use of violence against women. Legally, North Macedonia has taken significant steps, particularly with the adoption of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence in 2014. This law provides protective measures for victims, including restraining orders and the establishment of emergency shelters. Moreover, the country ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2017, committing itself to implementing international standards for preventing and combating violence against women. In 2023, North Macedonia adopted significant amendments to its Penal Code to align its legislation with the standards of the Istanbul Convention. These changes include:

- a)** Defining and criminalizing gender-based violence: for the first time, the Penal Code defines and criminalizes gender-based violence, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence (European Commission, 2023).

b) Criminalizing new offenses: offenses such as stalking, sexual harassment, and female genital mutilation have been criminalized for the first time (European Commission, 2023).

c) Improvement of the definition of rape: the Penal Code now defines rape based on consent and criminalizes it even when the victim is the current or former spouse or intimate partner (European Commission, 2023).

d) Criminalizing femicide: the Penal Code now criminalizes the killing of women and girls as a distinct form of gender-based violence (European Commission, 2023).

e) Increasing penalties for crimes committed within the context of gender-based violence: Penalties for certain crimes have been increased if they are committed as part of gender-based violence (European Commission, 2023).

These changes are the result of extensive work and collaboration between the Ministry of Justice, the Parliament of North Macedonia, non-governmental organizations, and international institutions. However, the implementation of these changes requires continuous training for involved professionals, increased resources for shelters and victim services, and the establishment of data collection and analysis systems to monitor trends and develop preventive and protective services (United Nations Women, 2023).

However, the implementation of these laws faces numerous challenges. The European Commission (2020) points out that a lack of resources, insufficient police training, and poor inter-institutional coordination are major obstacles. Even when laws exist, they are not enforced uniformly or effectively. Victims also face prejudice within the judicial system and hesitation from authorities to treat cases with the seriousness they deserve.

On the other hand, economic factors play a crucial role in women's vulnerability to violence. The lack of financial independence often forces women to remain in abusive relationships. The World Bank (2020) notes that women's participation in the labor force in North Macedonia is lower than that of men, and the gender pay gap further exacerbates economic dependency. In rural areas, women have fewer opportunities for education and employment, making them even more vulnerable to various forms of violence.

The ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2017 marked an important step forward in the fight against gender-based violence. This convention requires states to take active measures to prevent violence, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators effectively. The Council of Europe (2020) emphasizes that although there have been improvements, such as the establishment of shelters and the adoption of national action plans, full implementation of the convention requires sustained efforts and close cooperation between state institutions and civil society.

Civil society organizations play a crucial role in this process by providing support to victims, raising awareness, and monitoring the implementation of public policies. The European Parliament (2021) stresses that cooperation between the state and the non-governmental sector is essential for an integrated approach to combating violence.

In conclusion, gender-based violence in North Macedonia remains a significant challenge requiring continuous institutional and societal engagement. Effective intervention against GBV demands not only legal reforms but also cultural change, economic support for women, and strengthened protection mechanisms. Full implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the reinforcement of inter-institutional and cross-sectoral cooperation are essential steps toward building a more equal and safe society for all citizens.

An Empirical Analysis Of Gender-Based Violence In North Macedonia

To better understand the scope and impact of gender-based violence in North Macedonia, this section presents recent statistical data drawn from national reports and international sources. The data offers insight into the prevalence, forms, and reporting trends of such violence, highlighting key challenges in prevention and response. According to the World Health Organization (2018), around 35% of women experience physical and/or sexual violence from their partners during their lifetime, and women living in poverty are two to three times more likely to experience violence. Studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2011) show that unemployed women are at a higher risk of experiencing violence compared to those who are employed. Additionally, according to a World Bank report (2020), countries with higher levels of economic inequality have higher rates of gender-based violence. UN Women (2021) has also emphasized that women living in poverty with limited economic opportunities are more likely to remain in abusive relationships. These data confirm that economic inequality and poverty are key factors contributing to the increase in violence against women, making them more vulnerable to abuse and harder to escape from violent relationships.

According to the data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of North Macedonia, the situation regarding criminal offenses related to gender-based violence is as follows:

Year	Rape Offenses	Domestic Violence Offenses
2020	38	992
2021	25	1,056
2022	18	1,117
2023	33	1,082

(Source: MVR, 2025)

According to a survey conducted by the State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia in 2022, the percentage of gender-based violence is as follows: Women victims of psychological, physical (including threats), or sexual violence by an intimate partner in North Macedonia are 15.0% of respondents aged 18 to 74 years who participated in the survey and were willing to speak about their experiences. Of these, 8.4% of women reported experiencing psychological violence, such as insults, humiliation, restrictions on work and movement outside the home, bans on contact with close family and friends, as well as control and restriction of financial expenditures by the intimate partner. Among them, 1.1% stated that they were also victims of sexual violence by their intimate partner. (stat.gov.mk)

The highest percentage of women who have experienced psychological, physical (including threats), or sexual violence by an intimate partner are women aged 65 to 74 years (18.7%). The largest percentage of respondents in this age group experienced physical (including threats) or sexual violence (17.8%), and 0.5% of them reported being victims of sexual violence by their intimate partner. Among the young female population, one in six respondents was a victim of psychological, physical (including threats), or sexual violence by an intimate partner. 16.6% of women aged 18 to 29 years experienced psychological, physical (including threats), or sexual violence. Of these, 1.2% stated that they had experienced sexual violence by their intimate partner, regardless of whether they were in a legal marriage status or an informal partnership. (stat.gov.mk)

Age Group	Percentage of Women Experiencing Psychological, Physical, or Sexual Violence	Percentage Experiencing Sexual Violence
18-29	16.6%	1.2%
65-74	18.7%	0.5%

(Source: STAT, 2025)

The data shows that gender-based violence is a significant issue affecting women across all age groups, with a high prevalence of psychological, physical, and sexual violence, especially among younger women and those aged 65-74. Women living in economically insecure conditions and younger women are more vulnerable to violence from intimate partners.

CULTURAL, LEGAL, AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

Gender-based violence (GBV) represents one of the most widespread human rights violations and a multifaceted challenge that cannot be understood without analyzing the influence of cultural, legal, and economic factors. These elements are essential not only to understand the origins and spread of violence against women but also to identify the barriers that make its prevention and effective response difficult.

Cultural factors, closely related to patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, influence how society perceives gender roles and justifies abusive behaviors within family and community relationships. In many cases, these cultural norms normalize violence against women as an acceptable form of control within intimate relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Hester, 2013).

At the same time, the legal framework plays a crucial role in providing protection for victims and punishing perpetrators. However, gaps in legislation or its uneven application often mean that many cases go unreported or are inadequately addressed by authorities (European Commission, 2020; UN Women, 2020). In contexts where the law does not recognize all forms of violence, or where institutions are unprepared to deal with cases professionally and sensitively, this can worsen the situation for victims.

Finally, economic factors play a significant role in women's vulnerability to violence. Inequalities in employment opportunities, economic dependence, and lack of access to financial resources mean that many women are unable to leave abusive relationships, extending the cycle of violence (Kabeer, 2012; World Bank, 2020).

These three factors cultural, legal, and economic are interconnected and often reinforce each other, creating a broad system of oppression that makes it difficult to eradicate gender-based violence. Understanding how they interact is essential for developing sustainable policies and creating a fairer and safer society for women and girls.

Below, we will present in detail the cultural, legal, and economic factors that influence gender-based violence in order to provide a clearer overview.

Cultural Factors

a) Patriarchal structures and legal norms

Gender-based violence (GBV) is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of many societies, shaped by prevailing social norms, values, and historical power structures. One of the most significant cultural factors influencing GBV is the widespread existence of patriarchal ideologies, which position men as the dominant figures in both family and societal structures, relegating women to submissive roles. These patriarchal norms, which are entrenched in both legal and social systems, create an environment where violence against women is not only

tolerated but often justified as a means of maintaining control and order in the household (Milić, 2017). This is particularly evident in many societies, including those in the Balkans, where gender roles are rigidly defined, and women's subordination to men is considered both normal and acceptable (Hearn, 2015).

b) Stigmatization and the perception of violence as a private matter

In these contexts, violence is frequently framed as a private family matter, one that should not be interfered with by outsiders. This belief can lead to the normalization of violence, particularly when it is perceived as a means for men to assert their authority or "discipline" their female partners (Pivovarov, 2014). In North Macedonia, for example, domestic violence is often viewed as an issue that should be dealt with within the confines of the home, and external intervention is seen as inappropriate (Bajrami et al., 2019). The stigmatization of women who attempt to report violence further exacerbates the issue, as they fear social exclusion or blame from their communities, which in turn perpetuates the cycle of abuse (Hearn, 2015).

c) The influence of traditional and gender stereotypes

Cultural factors are not limited to the influence of patriarchal systems alone; traditional gender roles also play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward violence. In many cultures, gender stereotypes dictate that men are naturally dominant, strong, and in control, while women are expected to be nurturing, submissive, and dependent. These stereotypes reinforce the belief that men are entitled to exercise power and control over women, and violence is sometimes seen as an acceptable way to maintain that control (Dobash & Dobash, 2014). This view is especially prominent in rural areas, where traditional values are often more strongly upheld, and women are frequently pressured to endure abuse in order to maintain their families' honor (Pivovarov, 2014).

d) The influence of conservative religious beliefs

Religious beliefs can also influence cultural attitudes toward gender-based violence. Conservative interpretations of religious texts can be used to justify the subordinate role of women, reinforcing the idea that men have the right to control and discipline their wives. In some cases, religious teachings are invoked to legitimize violence, portraying it as a natural or even divinely ordained aspect of relationships between men and women (Galtung, 2016). This is particularly true in societies where religious authority holds significant sway over social and legal norms.

e) Prospects for change: activism and education

In such environments, the acceptance of gender-based violence is not only culturally ingrained but is also often seen as necessary to preserve the social order. As a result, many victims of violence find themselves trapped within the system, unable to seek help due to fear of retribution, social stigmatization, or a lack of support from their communities (Hearn, 2015). This cultural normalization of violence makes it incredibly difficult for women to escape abusive relationships, as they are conditioned to accept violence as a part of their lives. The cultural acceptance of gender-based violence is not static, however. Efforts to challenge and change cultural norms can have a profound impact on reducing the prevalence of such violence. Social movements, feminist activism, and education campaigns are crucial in shifting

cultural perceptions and challenging the social structures that sustain gender-based violence. By raising awareness and providing support for victims, these efforts can help dismantle the patriarchal systems that perpetuate violence and create a more equitable society (Bajrami et al., 2019).

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that North Macedonia, as a multiethnic state where different cultures and religions coexist, faces a deeply rooted problem and a major challenge for the country. Social factors represent a serious confrontation and are of great importance to our country, which contributes to the increase and widespread nature of this phenomenon, directly linked to the large number of unreported cases.

Legal Factors

a) Lack of Adequate Legislation

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most widespread forms of human rights violations worldwide. It is closely linked to unequal power structures and traditional gender roles. Legal factors play a crucial role in either exacerbating or preventing this phenomenon. Laws that are inadequate, unclear, unjust, or poorly enforced often contribute to maintaining a system where gender-based violence goes unpunished. First, the absence or weakness of specific legislation is a key factor influencing the prevalence of violence. In many countries, laws addressing domestic violence or sexual harassment are vague, limited, or non-existent. This lack of legal protection leaves victims vulnerable and fosters a climate of impunity. According to the United Nations (UN Women, 2021), more than one in three women globally has experienced physical or sexual violence, while many states have yet to criminalize domestic violence as a distinct offense.

b) Implementation Challenges and Systemic Bias

Another critical factor is the poor implementation of existing laws. Even where a strong legal framework exists, its enforcement is often hampered by a lack of resources, institutional capacity, and political will. In many cases, law enforcement and judicial authorities fail to take reports of violence seriously, leaving victims unprotected. Amnesty International (2020) notes that the lack of an adequate legal response contributes to a “culture of silence and fear” for survivors.

Additionally, deeply rooted gender stereotypes within the legal system hinder justice. Police officers, prosecutors, and judges may hold biased beliefs that blame victims or excuse perpetrators. Such attitudes not only undermine trust in the legal system but also discourage women from seeking justice (CEDAW Committee, 2017). Furthermore, discriminatory laws themselves reinforce gender inequality. These may include legal provisions that deny women equal rights in marriage, custody, inheritance, or legal testimony. According to Human Rights Watch (2019), laws that restrict women’s roles in society make it harder for them to seek help or escape abusive situations.

c) Barriers to Legal Aid and International Standards

Another significant issue is the lack of access to free legal aid. Victims of gender-based violence are often economically dependent and unable to afford legal representation or pursue lengthy legal proceedings. This hinders their right to access justice, particularly in rural or marginalized communities (UNWomen, 2021). In addition to these, the Council of Europe’s Gender Matters manual emphasizes that states have a legal and moral obligation to prevent and

respond to gender-based violence through clear legislation and effective institutions. The manual highlights that legal responses must be backed by education, human rights awareness, and gender-sensitive practices in all sectors, especially in youth work and education (Council of Europe, 2021). Moreover, international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Istanbul Convention have established important standards for states. These documents obligate governments to draft and enforce policies that prevent and punish gender-based violence (Council of Europe, 2011). Yet, their impact depends on each country's commitment to integrating these standards into national legislation.

d) The Case of North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, legal factors are crucial in addressing gender-based violence (GBV). The country has made significant legal reforms, including the criminalization of femicide, sexual harassment, and stalking, with amendments to the Criminal Code in 2023 that align with international standards such as the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2021). However, the implementation of these laws remains challenging. Victims often face institutional barriers, such as being turned away by social work centers or not recognized as victims of violence (Balkan Insight, 2022). Additionally, social stigma, economic dependency, and lack of legal assistance prevent many women from reporting violence. This leads to cycles of abuse that are difficult to escape (UNFPA, 2021). Moreover, the lack of adequate training for judicial and law enforcement professionals further hinders the effective response to GBV. Many professionals fail to fully understand the dynamics of gender-based violence, which affects their ability to provide appropriate support to victims (MYLA, 2020).

Despite these challenges, there are ongoing efforts by both national and international organizations, such as UNFPA and the British Embassy, to improve the systemic response to GBV. These include enhancing inter-institutional cooperation and providing specialized training to professionals (UNFPA, 2021). However, continued reform and greater public awareness are necessary to ensure that victims of GBV receive proper protection and justice. In conclusion, both the legal and its implementation in addressing gender-based violence in North Macedonia and globally are crucial in protecting victims and ensuring justice. While significant reforms have been made, challenges remain in effectively enforcing laws, overcoming social stigma, and providing adequate support to victims. Continued legal reform, better training for professionals, and increased public awareness are essential to combating gender-based violence and fostering a more equitable society.

Economic Factors

Gender-based violence is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that has a profound and widespread impact on individuals and society as a whole. Economic factors are among the primary causes that contribute to the spread and intensification of violence against women and girls. The link between economic factors and gender-based violence is crucial to understanding how certain economic conditions can create fertile ground for violence and how these factors can hinder the ability to break the cycle of violence. In this context, poverty, unemployment, economic insecurity, and gender inequality in the economic sphere are some of the factors that directly influence the occurrence of violence against women and girls.

a) Poverty and Economic Insecurity

One of the main factors contributing to gender-based violence is poverty and economic insecurity. Women who live in poverty and lack sufficient financial resources are much more exposed to violence, especially domestic violence. According to a study by the World Bank (2017), poverty and the lack of opportunities for earning stable income are factors that make women dependent on their partners, and this dependency can exacerbate situations of violence. When women are economically dependent, they may feel incapable of making independent decisions and may fear the economic consequences of leaving an abusive relationship. This cycle of poverty and violence is very difficult to break and can continue for generations. Moreover, economic insecurity can worsen living conditions, creating an environment where violence increases due to added financial pressure and economic stress.

b) Financial Independence and Abuse Escape

Another important aspect is the connection between economic support and the ability to achieve independence. Women who have the ability to earn their own income and secure financial stability are better able to leave violent situations. According to a report by the World Health Organization (2013), when women cannot control their financial resources, they are forced to remain in relationships where they experience multiple forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence. This deep economic dependency is a significant barrier for women seeking protection and freedom. While women with independent financial resources may have the opportunity to take steps to escape violence and secure a safer and more independent life, those who are dependent often feel trapped and powerless to change their situation.

c) Unemployment and Job Insecurity

Unemployment and job insecurity are also factors that directly impact the prevalence of gender-based violence. Women who are unemployed or work in insecure sectors are more exposed to violence, both within the home and at the workplace. According to a report by the International Labour Organization (2020), women working in insecure conditions, such as informal jobs or temporary contracts, face a higher risk of abuse and exploitation. Job insecurity directly impacts women's mental and emotional well-being, increasing stress and anxiety, which can contribute to the deterioration of living conditions and the occurrence of violence. Likewise, unemployment and lack of job opportunities contribute to poverty and create conditions that make it difficult for women to break free from the cycle of violence.

d) Economic Crises and Market Shocks

Another important economic factor influencing gender-based violence is the impact of economic crises and market shocks. When economic crises occur, such as the 2008 recession, economic insecurity and the loss of employment opportunities are directly related to an increase in violence against women. During periods of crisis, individuals face higher levels of stress, insecurity, and frustration, which can affect how they manage their relationships and may lead to violence. According to a study by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD, 2018), when there is a decrease in the ability to secure stable income, women are at greater risk of experiencing violence because their partners may feel more stressed and lose control, resorting to violence as a way to release tension and frustration.

e) Patriarchal Economic Structures

Finally, it is important to mention the impact of culture and patriarchal economic structures, which often favor men and undervalue women's economic opportunities and social roles. According to a study by UN Women (2015), societies where patriarchal structures dominate are those where women typically do not have equal access to economic resources and are more dependent on men. This economic dependency can lead to significant control over women's lives, including limiting their ability to make independent decisions. Women living in environments dominated by patriarchal norms may feel trapped in abusive relationships and excluded from economic processes that could help them build independent and violence-free lives.

f) The Situation in North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, economic factors play a significant role in the spread and intensification of gender-based violence. One of the main factors is unemployment and gender disparities in employment. Women in North Macedonia are more affected by unemployment, and they often lack access to stable, well-paid jobs, contributing to poverty and economic dependency on male partners. This economic dependency can create conditions that enable violence within family relationships. According to a World Bank study (2017), high unemployment and economic dependence are key factors that contribute to domestic violence. Additionally, many women work in the informal sector, where they lack legal and health protection and face insecure conditions that further worsen their economic situation.

Poverty is another critical factor, as many women in North Macedonia are forced to survive with limited resources, making them more vulnerable to economic and domestic violence. According to a UNDP report (2020), many women, living in poverty, feel economically trapped and cannot leave abusive situations. Economic insecurity and unemployment lead to deep dependency on partners, making it difficult for women to escape abusive relationships. Gender inequality is also a significant barrier, as women often do not have equal opportunities to enter the labor market or benefit from economic opportunities. According to a World Bank report (2021), women often face a substantial gender wage gap and limited job opportunities.

Economic crises, such as the one in 2008, also have a profound impact, causing increased tensions and frustrations that may lead to domestic violence. According to a study by the United Nations (2017), during times of crisis, economic insecurity leads to an increase in violence against women. Meanwhile, government policies have included some reforms to improve the economic situation of women, but much more needs to be done to ensure equal opportunities and protect women from violence. To address this issue, it is crucial to create opportunities for women's economic independence and ensure legal protection and support for those who are victims of violence.

In conclusion, economic factors play a crucial role in the spread of gender-based violence. Poverty, unemployment, economic insecurity, and the structure of a patriarchal society are all elements that contribute to creating conditions for violence and hinder the possibility of breaking the cycles of violence. To combat gender-based violence, it is essential for policies and societies to focus on creating equal opportunities for women in the economic sphere and ensuring that they have support and opportunities to lead independent lives, free from violence.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES

In 2017, North Macedonia ratified the Istanbul Convention, an important step in the fight against gender-based violence and domestic violence. This Convention imposed new legal and institutional obligations on the country, creating a new framework for victim protection and violence prevention. However, the implementation of these measures has faced significant challenges, including cultural barriers, resource shortages, and difficulties in inter-institutional coordination. This chapter examines the process of implementing the Istanbul Convention in North Macedonia and the challenges the country has encountered in its efforts to provide effective protection for victims of gender-based violence.

The implementation of the Istanbul Convention in North Macedonia has faced both progress and significant challenges. While the country ratified the Convention in 2017 and committed to its principles, including the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and the protection of victims, various hurdles remain. The legal framework in North Macedonia has undergone revisions to align with the provisions of the Convention, such as improvements to laws on domestic violence and the establishment of support mechanisms for victims, including shelters and helplines (World Bank, 2017). However, the implementation of these measures has been uneven, with limited resources allocated for their full execution. According to a report by the UNDP (2020), although there has been some progress in the legal and institutional response, victims still face significant barriers in accessing support services, particularly in rural areas.

One of the main challenges lies in the persistence of patriarchal cultural norms and social attitudes, which can undermine the effectiveness of legal protections. As noted by the World Bank (2021), cultural resistance to addressing gender-based violence remains strong in many communities, where violence against women is still seen as a private matter, rather than a public crime. These deeply ingrained attitudes contribute to a climate of silence and stigma, making it difficult for survivors to seek help or report abuse. This issue is compounded by economic barriers, as many women lack financial independence and are heavily dependent on their abusers, further entrenching their vulnerability (UNDP, 2020).

Moreover, the implementation of the Istanbul Convention has been hampered by inadequate training and insufficient coordination between the various institutions involved in addressing GBV. The police, judiciary, and healthcare professionals have not consistently received the necessary training to handle cases of domestic violence effectively, resulting in gaps in victim protection and insufficient legal action against perpetrators. A study by the United Nations (2017) highlighted the challenges of ensuring effective inter-institutional collaboration, which remains fragmented despite the creation of new legal structures designed to protect victims of violence.

Another critical challenge is the lack of sufficient funding for victim support services. While there have been efforts to increase the number of shelters and provide psychological support, the availability of these services is still limited. In particular, shelters are often overburdened, and resources for long-term recovery are inadequate (World Bank, 2017). The country also faces challenges related to public awareness, as many people remain unaware of the legal protections available under the Istanbul Convention, further exacerbating the problem. According to a report by the United Nations (2017), societal attitudes often discourage victims from seeking help, with many believing that reporting violence would result in social stigma or worsen their situation.

Despite these challenges, North Macedonia has made some notable progress in implementing the Istanbul Convention. The country has introduced public awareness campaigns and educational programs aimed at changing public attitudes toward gender-based

violence. There has been an increase in the number of shelters and services for victims, and the legal framework has been strengthened to ensure better protection for survivors. However, for the full potential of the Istanbul Convention to be realized, further improvements are needed in areas such as inter-institutional coordination, victim support, and financial resources. As the UNDP (2020) report suggests, greater efforts must be made to ensure that legal protections are not only in place but are also effectively implemented, particularly in underserved and rural communities.

In conclusion, while North Macedonia has made strides in implementing the Istanbul Convention, significant challenges remain. These challenges are rooted in cultural attitudes, economic dependency, inadequate resources, and gaps in institutional coordination. Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive approach, including sustained political will, better resource allocation, enhanced public awareness, and effective training for professionals involved in handling gender-based violence cases. By overcoming these challenges, North Macedonia can better fulfill its commitments under the Istanbul Convention and ensure that survivors of gender-based violence receive the protection and support they need.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, gender-based violence (GBV) remains a significant issue in North Macedonia, despite the country's commitment to addressing it through the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2017. The Convention has provided an important legal and institutional framework to combat GBV, offering better protection for victims and demanding significant changes in legislation and practice. However, while progress has been made in certain areas, many challenges persist, primarily stemming from deeply rooted cultural attitudes, economic vulnerabilities, and gaps in the effective implementation of laws and policies.

Culturally, traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms continue to shape societal attitudes towards women and violence, often hindering the willingness of victims to seek help or report abuse. This cultural resistance is particularly strong in rural areas, where conservative views prevail, and the notion of family privacy makes it difficult for many to speak out. On the economic front, the lack of financial independence and high levels of unemployment among women exacerbate their vulnerability to violence, trapping them in abusive relationships. Moreover, economic hardships prevent many women from accessing necessary support services, making it even more difficult for them to escape cycles of abuse.

The legal and institutional frameworks in North Macedonia have undergone some reforms in line with the Istanbul Convention's standards, yet implementation has been uneven. While there are some measures in place, such as shelters and victim support services, resource shortages, particularly in rural areas, remain a significant barrier to effective victim support. Furthermore, the lack of adequate training for professionals involved in handling GBV cases, including law enforcement and healthcare providers, contributes to insufficient responses to the needs of survivors.

Despite these challenges, the country has made some strides in raising awareness about GBV and in enhancing legal protections. The adoption of stronger laws and the creation of victim support mechanisms are positive steps. However, for these measures to have a real impact, the country must address the structural issues that continue to hinder progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE IMPROVEMENT

To better implement the Istanbul Convention and improve the protection of women and girls from GBV in North Macedonia, several steps are necessary:

1. **Raising Public Awareness:** Public awareness campaigns should focus on educating the general population about the rights of victims of gender-based violence and the importance of breaking the silence surrounding abuse. Challenging cultural and patriarchal norms that perpetuate violence is essential to creating a society where women feel safe and supported when coming forward.
2. **Improving Training and Resources for Professionals:** There is a critical need for ongoing training for police officers, judges, healthcare workers, and social service providers. This training should focus on how to identify and respond appropriately to cases of GBV, ensuring that survivors receive the support they need without fear of judgment or further victimization.
3. **Increasing Financial Support for Victim Services:** It is essential to allocate more resources to shelters, legal aid, and psychological support services for victims. Ensuring that these services are accessible in both urban and rural areas is crucial, as women in rural communities are often the most isolated and vulnerable. Additional funding will help ensure that these services are sustainable and adequately staffed.
4. **Strengthening Institutional Coordination:** Effective coordination between government institutions, NGOs, and other stakeholders is necessary to provide comprehensive support for victims. This includes improving communication and collaboration between law enforcement, the judiciary, and social services, so that cases of GBV are handled more efficiently and victims receive the necessary assistance at every stage of the process.
5. **Promoting Economic Empowerment for Women:** Addressing the economic factors that contribute to GBV is vital. Initiatives aimed at increasing women's financial independence, such as job creation, skills training, and access to financial resources, should be prioritized. Empowering women economically can help them break free from abusive relationships and reduce their dependence on their abusers.

In conclusion, while North Macedonia has made progress in implementing the Istanbul Convention, significant work remains to ensure the full protection of women and girls from gender-based violence. By focusing on raising awareness, improving institutional responses, ensuring adequate resources, and tackling the economic barriers faced by women, the country can create a more supportive environment for survivors and move closer to achieving the goals set by the Istanbul Convention. Addressing these challenges will not only improve the lives of those affected by violence but will also contribute to a more just and equitable society for all.

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